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ABSTRACT

This booklet describes implementation processes that are most likely to bring project success. The experiences of the Rural Education Program in the field, together with the findings of the implementation research, lead the author to believe that a successful implementation process is one that utilizes mutual adaptation. This process promotes interaction and mutual influence between the agency, the community, and the project plan. It relies on continuous problem-solving to make sure that within a project the training is focused on day-to-day issues, the materials are adapted to local needs, and there are sufficient participants to build project morale. Implementation becomes an organizational process that depends vitally on human interactions. (Author/MLF)

Keys to Community Involvement Series

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KEYS TO COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

SUCCESSFUL PROJECTS: EXAMINING THE RESEARCH

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ABOUT THE SERIES

Keys to Community Involvement is a series of booklets developed for governing boards, community leaders, group members, administrators and citizens. The booklets are designed to help these audiences strengthen their skills in group processes, work cooperatively with others, and plan and carry out new projects. Topics include techniques to maintain enthusiasm in a group, ways that agencies can effectively use consultants, and factors that affect introducing and implementing new projects.

The booklets are written by members of the Rural Education Program of the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. The Laboratory is a nonprofit, educational research and development corporation, headquartered in Portland, Oregon.

The booklets in the series are adapted from a much more comprehensive set of materials and training activities developed and field tested by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory over the past several years in dozens of locations throughout the western United States.

Information about other booklets in this series--titles and how to order--as well as information about related services--training, workshops and consultation--can be found on the inside and outside back covers of this booklet.

INTRODUCTION

Recently, in a state agency, a group of administrators and specialists lingered in the hall after their formal meeting and began sharing ideas about making new programs workable.

"The first few months of a new project are crucial," commented one. "That's when all the grand ideas leave the meeting rooms and get tested in the real world."

Members of the group responded with their stories about projects that had succeeded--and some that had not.

Finally, a seasoned administrator said, "You know, in my younger days I thought that planning was the most critical stage. If a new project bogged down, I'd fault the planning. Now, I think there's more to it. The projects that make it are the ones that gain support in the agency and community."

Many people believe that successful projects follow a simple sequence: first, careful and detailed plans are made, then people and resources are organized to carry out the plans. Good project results are expected to follow, somewhat automatically, from good plans and project designs. However, project success takes more than simply carrying out the original plans, according to several research studies[1] and the field experience of the Rural Education Program. To create success, projects must foster special relationships between project personnel, client groups and agency leaders during the project's implementation.

People usually think of project implementation in terms of content and process. The content refers to the new techniques or "technology" which the project hopes to see adapted and used by clients. The process refers to the way the project staff communicates and relates to people that assist in the adoption of the content. This booklet describes those implementation processes which are most likely to bring project success. The information about these processes comes from our program's field experience and from a series of research studies which investigated the factors that lead to project success or failure. This information is critical for agency leaders and project managers who are responsible for planning and implementing new programs.

MAKING IMPLEMENTATION WORK

A major feature of successful programs is that they are based on a need felt by local people. One research study noted that, "Successful adoptions cannot occur unless the local people first recognize that something is lacking and define their need."[2] Another research study[3] found that program success was characterized by a "problem-solving" orientation in the local system. That is, the local system had identified and already begun to attack the problem

before outside money became available. In contrast, failures in implementation were associated with an "opportunistic" orientation where local agencies simply supplemented their budgets with money that happened to be available. Other characteristics of successful projects include the following:

- Project designs were not "prepackaged" but were adapted by local people to fit their unique situations.

- Rather than adopting materials which were developed elsewhere, materials were adapted or developed to fit local needs.

- Continuous planning and replanning went on--not just a burst of planning at the outset.

- Training emerged from the ongoing needs of the project and the participants and was delivered at appropriate intervals throughout the life of the project, rather than being delivered in one shot at the beginning.

- Technical assistance was assured continuously, in contrast to one- or two-day visits from busy "experts."

- Strong support was given by key administrators at the local level.

Researchers also point to another factor that was equally important for successful projects. Contrary to many assumptions, effective implementation does not result merely from the careful application of new techniques. Implementation is an organizational process that requires interaction between the new project and its agency setting. This organizational process is called "mutual adaptation."[4]

MUTUAL ADAPTATION

The term mutual adaptation denotes a two-way process where an agency modifies its setting and practices in order to support a new project, and where a new project undergoes design modifications and other adjustments to fit the capacities of the agency. If either focus begins to dominate the other, communication and collaboration can break down and project outcomes can be impaired.

Mutual adaptation can involve a variety of adjustments. For example, project designs can be modified to fit the actual conditions of a site.

> *In one Rural Education Program site, the project design originally called for the stages of the project to be implemented over a 12- to 18-month period. However, because the small community could only pay for three months of training, the project design was modified so that the first four stages were completed during April, May, and June of the first year.*
>
> *The following year, even though formal training had ceased, the school-community group initiated a bicultural curriculum for Indian children, created a school library and began a kindergarten program.*

Mutual adaptation can also bring interim changes in the standard practices that agency administrators use to support their staff.

In one local project, the district superintendent recommended that formal faculty meeting time be used for school faculty to become more involved in project activities. He also had the teaching staff released from classroom duties, with pay, and hired teacher substitutes so that the school staff could visit other schools during their "search for alternatives"--one stage of the new project.

In another site, the superintendent of the state education agency recommended that monies from the inservice education funds be used to pay for credit hours that were granted to the state education agency staff members who were learning to become project trainers.

To achieve mutual adaptation, administrators on local, regional and state levels may work together to influence decisions that previously rested in one agency.

In one state, a school-community project was drawing near conclusion. The state agency task force, which was responsible for monitoring the project, created a project evaluation design. The local project staff were concerned that the presence of evaluators interviewing local community members might be misinterpreted as a part of the local project activities. A conference involving decision makers from the state and regional agencies and the local school district was held to discuss the issue. As a result, a description of the evaluation process and a carefully designed interview schedule was published in the local community newspaper. Rather than disrupting project activities, the evaluation process created additional publicity and seemed to arouse further support for the project.

These adjustments are sometimes difficult and require careful attention. Although they do not guarantee success, they do increase the likelihood that project outcomes will be closer to desired goals. In the history of the Rural Education Program, efforts invested in mutual adaptation have created results that have pleasantly surprised the participants and exceeded their expectations. As the day-to-day needs emerged, each project employed its own combination of choices about such issues as those just described. As a result, their implementations occurred in different ways, depending on the unique circumstances in each locale.

BUILDING MUTUAL ADAPTATION

Recent research suggests that the main factor which promotes mutual adaptation is continuous problem solving, which works to keep the project design flexible, adaptive and congruent with agency and field settings. By continuous problem solving we mean:

- problem solving that systematically enables people to share their ideas, identify major concerns, search for alternative solutions, decide what they will do, implement their decisions and assess the outcomes

- problem solving that establishes communication among local, regional and state participants

- problem solving that occurs regularly to address concerns and make adjustments as needed

- problem solving that is based on data about what did and did not work well and that adjusts project activities accordingly

Continuous problem solving is a way to identify issues and determine solutions before problems become crises. Meetings that involve representatives of all participants can provide a forum for continuous problem solving. Here participants can see what works and doesn't work and modify practices accordingly. The three questions which usually arise during continuous problem solving are:

1. Is training keyed to project operations and trainee concerns?

2. Are users adapting materials and other resources to their specific needs?

3. Does the project involve a sufficient number of participants to build project morale and to represent a wide assortment of community, school and agency concerns?

Continuous problem solving will answer these questions in a practical and effective manner. A more detailed discussion of problem solving is contained in another booklet in the *Keys to Community Involvement* Series, entitled "Problem Solving: A Five-Step Model."

IS TRAINING KEYED TO PROJECT OPERATIONS?

Training is more effective if the trainer continuously considers the needs of both trainees and project operations and addresses these needs in the training sessions.

This premise was verified by one research study which found that, "Training was significantly related to project outcomes only when it was tied to the specifics of project operation and to the practical day-to-day problems of the project participants."[5]

The following training issues are pertinent to many new projects:

- Initially, project participants need a thorough orientation to the new program. Once they begin their field work, trainers will need to give concrete "how-to-do-it" workshops which specifically address the daily operations in a site.

- Project coordinators need experience both in project approach and in the local setting. This expertise enables coordinators to give specific suggestions when assisting and managing project personnel.

- Project trainers need to recognize that any unfamiliarity with the local setting and local issues will impair their effectiveness in keying training to operations.

- The operations of the project will probably indicate that training is needed for people other than project personnel. Agency specialists and field consultants may need training to relate effectively to the new program. Agency administrative teams may need training to effectively build collaboration between groups and agencies.

Many issues are likely to arise about the relationship between training and project operations. A useful rule of thumb is *when in doubt, keep training practical and immediate*.

Training is effective if trainees:

- demonstrate knowledge of tasks to be accomplished and remain task oriented
- demonstrate competence to carry out their own tasks
- use communication skills and behavior which support relationships within a work group
- use processes which build collaboration between groups

When the training format and the trainers offer regular opportunities for trainees to air their concerns and to assess the effectiveness of their training, then the day-to-day activities can be carried out by interested and competent people.

ARE PARTICIPANTS ADAPTING THEIR MATERIALS AND OTHER RESOURCES TO THEIR SPECIFIC NEEDS?

It is important that participants review printed materials and adapt them to the specifics of their own situation. Adaptation may require careful "adjusting" of existing materials, or the creation of supplementary materials from scratch. These adaptations can play an important role in successful project implementation and in project outcomes. As one research study noted: "The value of producing one's own materials may not lie principally in the merits of the

final product, but in the activity of development itself. The exercise of 'reinventing the wheel' can provide an important opportunity for staff to work through and understand project precepts and to develop a sense of 'ownership' in project methods and goals."[6]

> *One project included members from a Navajo Reservation who created several materials and techniques which would work effectively in the Navajo culture, which has no written language. Rather than mailing out needs assessment questionnaires, which could be answered by only a few Navajos who could read English, project members went from hogan to hogan conducting the interviews in the Navajo language. They translated the needs assessment survey questions into Navajo and then translated the Navajo answers back into English so that they could send a written report of their findings to their school board.*
>
> *Another project made site visitations to other schools. A special booklet, entitled "Responsibilities of Site Visitors," described the criteria the group had selected to use, the itinerary of their trips and practical observation and interviewing techniques to use during the visits. These included a notable piece of advice: "Ask questions--keep them talking--listen and listen!"*

Project participants are likely to find that locally adapted materials will fit their needs better. By reworking the materials, the participants are reworking significant precepts of the project, gaining a sense of ownership of them and implementing them in daily practices. They have an interest in making the project work well.

DOES THE PROJECT INVOLVE A SUFFICIENT NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS?

If people feel a strong commitment to their new project and the local agency considers the project to be important, then it is easy for project participants to feel that all will go well. However, research indicates that individuals who are nonparticipants in the project can often communicate negative or indifferent attitudes that erode project morale. Sometimes these nonparticipants create pressure for the participants to "give up" when their work hits bumpier times. Researchers described this phenomenon by saying, "Apparently, a 'critical mass' of project participants is necessary to build the support and morale of the project staff. Furthermore, a critical mass of project staff in a given site is able to establish a norm for change in the setting, rather than making project staff seem to be deviant."[7]

Our experience has similarly shown that when enough people from all parts of the local community, and the supporting agency are aware of, and involved in a new program, the project is strengthened. One reason seems to be that wide, representative participation enhances communication and enables many people to see that the project can help them do their work better. When they see the project in this light, they begin to invest energy in maintaining it.

> *In one state education agency, the project staff acknowledged the principle of representation in a big way. They persuaded members of the agency's administrative team to poll their units and collect opinions about a position paper which the project staff prepared. This paper strongly advocated citizen participation in educational*

decision making. The administrative team members were asked to consider the results of this polling as they made their decision about the position paper. As a result of this procedural change:

- *More agency members learned about the project and the additional recognition from colleagues enhanced the morale of the project staff.*
- *The administrative team recognized that the polling procedure resulted in a better data base for their decision making. A precedent was thus set which resulted in more two-way communication between administrators and staff prior to administrative decision making.*
- *An increase in "ownership" of the citizen participation approach was clearly demonstrated by the administrative team and many agency members.*
- *The state board which governed the agency received the position paper, discussed it and recommended that citizen participation in educational decision making become the agency's first priority.*
- *A representative task force was appointed to design and implement an agency-wide inservice program regarding citizen participation in educational decision making.*

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

In summary, the experiences of the Rural Education Program in the field, together with the findings of the implementation research, lead us to believe that a successful implementation process is one which utilizes mutual adaptation. This process promotes interaction and mutual influence between the agency, the community and the project plan. It relies on continuous problem solving to make sure that within a project:

- the training is focused on day-to-day issues
- the materials are adapted to local needs
- there are sufficient participants to build project morale

Implementation becomes an organizational process that depends vitally upon human interactions. When neither project concerns nor agency concerns dominate decisions, then both project and agency people can collaborate and seek ways to satisfy their specific needs. If a project demonstrates that it can satisfy significant needs, then it is more likely to enjoy success.

FOOTNOTES

1. Three studies that are particularly comprehensive and form the basis of this paper include:

Julia Cheever, S. B. Neill, and J. Quinn, Transferring Success. Prepared for the U.S. Office of Education, HEW. 300-75-0402. (San Francisco: Far West Laboratory for Education, Research and Development, 1976)

Michael Fullan and Alan Pomfret, Review of Research on Curriculum Implementation. Prepared for the National Institute of Education, NIE-P-74-0122. (Ontario: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 1975)

P. Berman and M. W. McLaughlin, Federal Programs Supporting Educational Change, Volume IV: The Findings in Review. Prepared for the U.S. Office of Education, HEW. R-1589/4-HEW. 300-75-0402. (Santa Monica, California: Rand Corporation, 1975)

2. Cheever, Neill, and Quinn, Transferring Success, p. 28

3. Berman and McLaughlin, Federal Programs, p. 18

4. Ibid., p. 10

5. Ibid., p. 9

6. Ibid., pp. 19-20

7. Ibid., p. 20

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